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The Forum

Second Language Pronunciation Teaching: Insights from Research

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Despite increased interest in second language (L2) pronunciation in recent years, the topic has been marginalized in the field of second language acquisition and teaching. Far less work has been carried out on L2 pronunciation, compared to skills such as grammar and vocabulary that have received much attention. Most of the instructional materials and practices developed for L2 pronunciation tend to heavily rely on basic intuitive notions suggested by language teachers and researchers, rather than research-based evidence (Derwing & Munro, 2005).

Such lack of attention to pronunciation teaching has resulted in a limited understanding of the application of pronunciation instruction to L2 classrooms. Possible explanations for this circumstance include the following general tendencies observed in the fields of L2 and foreign language (FL) acquisition and teaching. First, language teachers are often confused about what kind of learning goal should be set for pronunciation and how learners should be guided toward reaching that goal. The confusion is in part rooted in the claims and observations made about the *critical period* (see Scovel, 2000) in language learning. A number of studies concerning L2 ultimate attainment have shown that late language learners—those who acquire a second/foreign language after early childhood—are likely to exhibit non-native-like patterns of pronunciation, typically referred to as *foreign accent* (e.g., Flege, Munro, & MacKay, 1995; Scovel, 2000). Although cases of rare, exceptional learners (late L2 learners who attain native-level pronunciation accuracy) have also been reported in some studies (e.g., Moyer, 2004), many language teachers and (late) learners are discouraged by the generally accepted assumption that getting rid of a foreign accent after early childhood is almost impossible. Their learning goals, therefore, tend to be unclear when it comes to pronunciation. Not knowing what is desirable or realistic, L2/FL learners and teachers often give up attending to pronunciation, choosing instead to focus on other skills.

Moreover, communicative language teaching (CLT), the dominant pedagogical approach today, emphasizes phonological fluency rather than discrete-point accuracy (Pennington & Richards, 1986). Thus, the focus of phonological instruction in communicatively oriented language learning settings is to promote the learner's ability to 'negotiate for meaning' (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Moyer, 2015), helping the learner appropriately and sufficiently convey meaning to complete a specific speech act, rather than holding them to a native-like standard. Abercrombie (1949) also argued decades ago that "language learners need no more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation" (p. 120). Then, the question that arises is: what phonological features are needed and how can they be taught to promote the students' ability to negotiate meaning? Particularly, in the case of the English language, which is now spoken as a lingua franca (i.e., spoken by non-native speakers as much as or more than by native speakers) (Jenkins, 2000), *intelligibility* (i.e., the extent to which an utterance is understood by a listener) is considered to be a more reasonable and realistic goal (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Gilbert, 1993; Leather, 1983; Levis, 2005). However, the problem lies in the fact that "no unified teaching agenda has emerged to operationalize intelligibility, i.e., to specify instructional techniques in practical terms" (Moyer, 2015, p. 152). Derwing and Munro (2005) highlight the necessity to establish ways of assessing intelligibility (e.g., the transcription task is widely used for measurement) and to identify factors that contribute to intelligibility.

Although the number is not large, studies that evaluated the efficacy of pronunciation teaching have delivered mixed results. Evidence in favor of instruction suggests that instruction can "become part of the learners' underlying phonological competence, even if they are at a point many would consider fossilized" (Moyer, 2015, p. 150) and that its effect is greater when it is explicit (Derwing & Rossiter, 2003; Saito, 2011). Learners in general need help in order to notice the difference (or 'gap') between their own production and the native model input provided to them (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Schmidt, 1990). To assist learners in acquiring a desired, accurate pronunciation at both discrete and discourse levels, instructional contexts are expected to provide sufficient authentic and pedagogical input; instruction can structure and enhance formal input efficiently by directing the learner's attention to form and meaning simultaneously (Skehan, 1998). Particularly, phonological instruction which focuses on perceptual training (e.g., discrimination and identification of phonological units or discourse features) has been found to aid production as well (Bradlow, Pisoni, Akahane-Yamada, & Tohkura, 1997; Derwing, Munro, & Wiebe, 1998; Gilbert, 1993; Wang & Munro, 2004).

The classroom also offers opportunities for interactive practice as well as corrective feedback and correction (i.e., negative evidence) provided by the teacher. In fact, some studies of corrective feedback have reported that phonological feedback is more likely to result in self-correction and uptake (evidenced by attempted repair), compared to grammatical and lexical feedback (e.g., Lyster, 1998). With regard to this finding, Lyster (1998) explains that phonological recasts are comparatively short but highly salient and thus can elicit more repairs. Moreover, phonological feedback, unlike grammatical or lexical feedback, does not force learners to undergo a complex re-analysis of form and meaning since it usually requires a simple modification of phonological features such as a vowel substitution (Neri, Cucchiarini, Strik, & Boves, 2002; Sheen, 2006).

It should be noted, however, that instruction and explicit practice may not work for every learner in all circumstances since the impact of instruction varies depending on the conditions under which it is offered, its availability and consistency, as well as the learner's receptivity to instruction (Moyer, 2015). More research is needed to unveil the differential effects of instruction on L2 pronunciation. For example, issues that future research can address include the relationship between perception and production (or discrimination and articulation) and the question of how instructional technology and tools can best be applied. As it may be true in other subfields of L2/FL learning, the collaborative work of researchers and teachers is essential and required in order to suit learners' needs and help them set and reach their goals, whether these goals entail intelligibility or native-like attainment.

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